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ABSTRACT

A two-part questionnaire concerning ethical behavior was prepared and distributed to 300 public school teachers and 75 administrators in the middle geographic region of Tennessee. Part I of the questionnaire asked respondents to position 18 different behaviors on a five-point scale from "ethical" to "very unethical." Part II asked respondents how regularly members of each respondent group (teachers or administrators) practiced the behaviors cited in part I. The behaviors characterized by teachers as least ethical were passing blame for errors to an innocent coworker, stealing from school funds, claiming undeserved credit, and repeating confidential information. The teachers positioned six of the 18 behaviors between "basically unethical" and "very unethical" on the scale. The administrators positioned 10 of the behaviors in this category, listing repeating confidential information, stealing school funds, and blaming others for errors as the least ethical. Both groups considered failing to report others' rule violations and hiring well-qualified family members as the least unethical of the 18 behaviors. Each of the two respondent groups tended to regard the other group as more likely to practice unethical behaviors, but both groups denied that either group practiced these behaviors frequently. (PGD)

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A STUDY OF THE ATTITUDES OF PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS IN MIDDLE TENNESSEE CONCERNING ETHICAL BEHAVIORS

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A Research Study Presented
at the Fifteenth Annual Meeting
of the Mid-South Educational Research
Association in Memphis, Tennessee on
November 20, 1986

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A STUDY OF THE ATTITUDES OF PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS IN MIDDLE TENNESSEE CONCERNING ETHICAL BEHAVIORS

Introduction

Ethics are principles of conduct strongly influencing the actions of individuals, groups or organizations. A study of the "ethical" is concerned with standards for judging "rightness" or "wrongness" of human conduct. Ethical conduct may be either consciously controlled or may be subscribed to through subconscious dispositions. Ethics approximates values. Ethical considerations may not necessarily be what "is" but, rather, what "should" be. Moreover, ethics is concerned with acceptable and conscionable standards which are determined by a specific society, culture or influences of other particular groups. Therefore, rightness and wrongness imply and express certain "norms" or principles of conduct in a given circumstance.

Among the questions involved in making a determination of the "ethical" are the following: What behavior is good? What behavior is desirable? What behavior is worthwhile? What action is acceptable? and, What behavior should be encouraged? Deciding action which is right or wrong and acceptable or unacceptable may be determined best by responding to these or similar questions. A practical approach to determining appropriate ethical behavior is to participate in simulation activities which reveal perceptions or attitudes regarding conduct that is most worthwhile, should be pursued and systematically encouraged.

Reflection on ethical concerns makes it possible to gain better insight into the type behavior which enhances participation in life's

experiences and the discharge of professional responsibilities. One's ethical precepts are founded in philosophy, inculturation, personal beliefs, and convictions. Consequently, ethics are interpreted through thought patterns, attitudes, individual and group actions, and personal responses. It may be concluded that the relationship between beliefs and behavior is similar to the congruence between ethics and moral qualities. That which a person believes, values, and considers ethical is usually revealed through thought, personal action, and ethical commitments.

There is an increased awareness and subsequent discussion of "ethics" among public school educators. School administrators and teachers are public officials who are charged with the responsibility to provide educational services and to maintain the public trust. Recently, there have been various reports of instances where the public trust has been compromised and professional behavior questioned. These incidents have occurred in public schools as well as other governmental entities. As a result, citizens and school personnel have become more alert to ethics in the public sector. Also, ethics is a viable concern within individual schools and school systems. Ethical behavior is important and contributes to public confidence. Its practice enhances the effectiveness of public education.

Purpose of the Study

The purposes of this study are two fold. The first purpose was to determine administrators and teachers rankings of ethical behaviors from a designated list of ethical situations. Secondly, the study was designed to compare the attitudes of selected public school teachers and

administrators toward certain prescribed ethical situations.

Procedures

A two-part questionnaire concerning ethical behavior was prepared and distributed to a sample of educators in the middle geographic region of Tennessee. Part I of the questionnaire included 18 ethical situations to which teachers and administrators provided their perceptions about the ethics of each situation. In Part II of the questionnaire, each respondent group indicated the regularity with which they and the other respondent group actually practiced the 18 suggested behavior situations (same ethical situations as in Part I).

The questionnaires were sent to 300 public school teachers and 75 administrators. The return rate for the questionnaire was 73 percent (219) for teachers and 76 percent (57) for administrators. Point biserial correlation was used with the dichotomous data and an appropriate t-test to determine the significance of the correlations.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

In Part I of the questionnaire the participants were asked to indicate their perceptions of each of 18 ethical situations using a five-point Likert-type scale. The scale ranged from 1 to 5. (1 = Ethical, 2 = Almost Ethical, 3 = Somewhat Ethical, 4 = Basically Unethical, 5 = Very Unethical).

Table 1 shows the ranking of mean scores for teachers on each of the 18 ethical situations that were provided on the questionnaire. Teachers thought that passing blame to innocent coworker (4.90) was the most unethical of those situations presented. Following this situation,

TABLE 1
TEACHER'S RANKINGS OF ETHICAL BEHAVIOR

Behavior Situations	Mean Score	Rank
(1.) Passing blame for errors to an innocent co-worker.	4.90	1
(2.) Repeating confidential information.	4.55	4
(3.) Falsifying school reports (attendance, transportation, other).	3.73	11
(4.) Claiming credit for some other person's work.	4.65	3
(5.) Discussion of students, teachers, or other school personnel in "gossip" sessions.	3.90	8.5
(6.) Take "petty cash" from school funds for personal purposes.	4.88	2
(7.) Using school materials and supplies (pens, paper, disc, stamps, and other such items) for personal or family needs.	3.62	13
(8.) Giving gifts/favors in exchange for special privileges.	4.20	5
(9.) Accepting gifts/favors in exchange for preferential treatment.	4.18	6
(10.) To ignore or violate school policies or rules.	3.90	8.5
(11.) To take sick leave to transact personal business.	3.16	16
(12.) Concealing one's errors.	3.27	15
(13.) Doing personal business on school time.	3.50	14
(14.) Taking extra personal time while at school (extra breaks, late getting to class, early departure from school, and other similar events.	3.68	12
(15.) Using the influence of school purchasing privileges to make personal purchases.	3.78	10

Behavior Situations	Mean Score	Rank
(16.) Attempt to sell items to students, parents, teachers, or other school personnel for personal gain.	3.91	7
(17.) Not reporting others' violations of school policies and rules.	2.85	17
(18.) An administrator employing a spouse (or other family member) who is apparently the best qualified person for the position.	1.78	18

other situations that were considered highly unethical were stealing petty cash (4.88), claiming credit for the work of others (4.65), repeating confidential information (4.55), giving gifts or favors for special privileges (4.20) and, accepting gifts in exchange for preferential treatment (4.18).

Table 2 shows the administrators' rankings based on mean scores for the same 18 ethical situations in Part I of the questionnaire. The administrators group considered "repeating confidential information" to be the most unethical behavior among those listed (5.00). Other behaviors that was considered basically unethical were taking petty cash for personal use (4.98), passing blame to co-workers (4.96), unwarranted discussion of school personnel (4.86), accepting gifts in exchange for special treatment (4.77), giving gifts or favors in exchange for special privileges (4.74), claiming credit for some other persons work (4.70), violating school policy and rules (4.68), falsifying school reports (4.53) and, using school supplies for personal needs (4.00).

A point biserial correlation of -.2202 indicates a slightly inverse relationship between the mean scores of the two groups. The correlation coefficient is significant at the .001 level.

In Part II of the questionnaire the two respondent groups indicated their perceptions concerning how often teachers and administrators practiced the behavior suggested in the 18 ethical situations(same ethical situations as in Part I). The scale for collecting responses ranged from 1 to 5 (1 = Never, 2 = Seldom, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Usually).

Table 3 shows the mean scores of teachers perceptions of how frequently each of the 18 prescribed ethical behaviors were practiced by

TABLE 2
ADMINISTRATORS' RANKINGS OF ETHICAL BEHAVIOR

Behavior Situations	Mean Score	Rank
(1.) Passing blame for errors to an innocent co-worker.	4.96	3
(2.) Repeating confidential information.	5.00	1
(3.) Falsifying school reports (attendance, transportation, other).	4.53	9
(4.) Claiming credit for some other person's work.	4.70	7
(5.) Discussion of students, teachers, or other school personnel in "gossip" sessions.	4.86	4
(6.) Take "petty cash" from school funds for personal purposes.	4.98	2
(7.) Using school materials and supplies (pens, paper, disc, stamps, and other such items) for personal or family needs.	4.00	10
(8.) Giving gifts/favors in exchange for special privileges.	4.74	6
(9.) Accepting gifts/favors in exchange for preferential treatment.	4.77	5
(10.) To ignore or violate school policies and rules.	4.68	8
(11.) To take sick leave to transact personal business.	3.58	16
(12.) Concealing one's errors.	3.70	12.5
(13.) Doing personal business on school time.	3.77	11
(14.) Taking extra personal time while at school (extra breaks, late getting to class, early departure from school, and other similar events.	3.60	15
(15.) Using the influence of school purchasing privileges to make personal purchases.	3.68	14

Behavior Situations	Mean Score	Rank
(16.) Attempt to sell items to students, parents, teachers, or other school personnel for personal gain.	3.70	12.5
(17.) Not reporting others' violations of school policies and rules.	3.40	17
(18.) An adminstrator employing a spouse (or other family member) who is apparently the best qualified person for the position.	1.95	18

TABLE 3
FREQUENCY BEHAVIOR IS PRACTICED
AS PERCEIVED BY TEACHERS

Behavior Situations	Teachers T	Teachers A
(1.) Passing blame for errors to an innocent co-worker.	2.64	3.00
(2.) Repeating confidential information.	3.20	2.80
(3.) Falsifying school reports.	2.24	2.48
(4.) Claiming credit for some other person's work.	2.52	3.04
(5.) Discussing students, teacher, and others in "gossip" sessions.	2.56	3.08
(6.) Take "petty cash" from school funds for personal purposes.	1.60	2.00
(7.) Using school materials and supplies for personal or family needs.	2.68	2.64
(8.) Giving gifts/favors in exchange for special privileges.	2.44	2.68
(9.) Accepting gifts/favors in exchange for preferential treatment.	2.32	2.68
(10.) To ignore or violate school policies and rules.	2.36	2.28
(11.) To take sick leave to transact personal business.	3.22	2.66
(12.) Concealing one's errors.	2.80	3.16
(13.) Conducting personal business on school time.	2.96	3.32
(14.) Taking extra personal time from duties while at school.	2.52	3.04
(15.) Using the influence of school purchasing privileges to make personal purchases.	2.12	3.00
(16.) Attempt to sell items at school for personal gain.	2.12	2.04
(17.) Not reporting others' violations of school policies and rules.	2.56	2.68
(18.) An administrator employing a spouse who is apparently the best qualified person for the position.	2.56	3.28
Overall Mean Score	2.52	2.77

Point Biserial Correlation -.0136
t = .0544 Not Significant at the .05 level

teachers and administrators. In Table 4 the mean scores of the administrators' attitudes concerning the same information are provided. In comparing the attitudes of the two groups it was found that both teachers and administrators agree that the administrators more often passed blame for errors to co-workers. There was also agreement that teachers as a group more frequently repeated confidential information. It was interesting that administrators reported that they might sometimes falsify school reports. Some of the reports effect the amount of financial support that the school or school system receives. Also, both respondent groups believed that administrators claimed credit for others work "sometimes-half the time." There was disagreement between the two groups concerning discussing school personnel in an unethical setting. Teachers thought that administrators more often participated in gossip sessions in which school personnel affairs were discussed. Conversely, the administrators were of the opinion that teachers more often participated in this type behavior.

It might be concluded from the mean scores that both groups considered administrators and teachers to be honest in so far as petty cash accounts are concerned and the use of school materials for personal use. The administrators' sample took the position that teachers would more frequently ignore or violate school policies. Both teachers and administrators concluded that teachers sometimes took sick leave for the purpose of transacting personal business. Teachers reported that they felt that administrators would conduct personal business on school time more often than teachers. There was a difference of opinion regarding the perceived frequence of concealing errors. The teachers thought that administrators

TABLE 4
FREQUENCY BEHAVIOR IS PRACTICED
AS PERCEIVED BY ADMINISTRATORS

Behavior Situations	Administrators T	A
(1.) Passing blame for errors to an innocent co-worker.	2.66	2.73
(2.) Repeating confidential information.	3.22	2.88
(3.) Falsifying school reports.	2.33	2.78
(4.) Claiming credit for some other person's work.	2.77	3.09
(5.) Discussing students, teachers, and others in "gossip" sessions.	3.55	2.88
(6.) Take "petty cash" from school funds for personal purposes.	1.77	1.67
(7.) Using school materials and supplies for personal or family needs.	2.44	2.33
(8.) Giving gifts/favors in exchange for special privileges.	2.11	2.33
(9.) Accepting gifts/favors in exchange for preferential treatment.	2.33	2.61
(10.) To ignore or violate school policies and rules.	2.77	2.44
(11.) To take sick leave to transact personal business.	2.88	2.84
(12.) Concealing one's errors.	2.77	2.45
(13.) Conducting personal business on school time.	2.44	2.66
(14.) Taking extra personal time from duties while at school.	2.55	2.33
(15.) Using the influence of school purchasing privileges to make personal purchases.	2.00	2.22
(16.) Attempt to sell items at school for personal gain.	2.00	1.55
(17.) Not reporting others' violations of school policies and rules.	2.22	2.22
(18.) An administrator employing a spouse who is apparently the best qualified person for the position.	2.44	2.67
Overall Mean Score	2.51	2.48

Point Biserial Correlation -.3453
t = -2.1457 Significant at the .05 level

practiced this behavior more often and administrators said that teachers did this more regularly. Also, administrators reported that teachers took extra personal time from classroom responsibilities more often than administrators would from their responsibilities. The teacher group said the opposite. They were of the attitude that administrators participated in the behavior more often than teachers. An administrator's more flexible work schedule might cause the teacher to reach this perception concerning this matter. Neither group believed that either of the respondent groups reported violations of school policies and rules with regularity. Overall mean scores indicate that both groups perceive themselves and the other group generally ethical in their actions and professional conduct.

Summary

The results of the study include a ranking of ethical behaviors from a designated list of ethical situations. The teachers considered stealing from school funds, blaming others for errors, claiming undeserved credit, falsifying reports and reporting confidential information to be most unethical. The administrative group reported that they believed stealing from school funds, repeating confidential information, claiming credit for others work, passing blame to others, and accepting gifts in exchange for privileges to rank among the most unethical conduct. On the average teachers perceived teachers to be less inclined (mean score 2.52 on a 5-point scale) to become involved in the unethical behavior situations listed than would administrators (2.77). The administrators reported that in the situations which they considered unethical, teachers were more likely to conduct themselves in an unethical manner (mean score 2.51)

than were administrators (mean score 2.48). Overall, both groups believed that neither teachers nor administrators would behave unethically more than "sometimes" in the selected situations. In the situations that teachers and administrators considered most unethical both groups reported that they would never or seldom practice that behavior.

The ethical conduct of those within a school system or other public agency is very important to the perceived effectiveness of the organization. Ethical behavior enhances public confidence and may be beneficial to gaining additional support for programs and efforts in our public schools.